

Commentary

Integrity Versus Hypocrisy—That Delicate Balance A Commentary on Humanity

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Life is a paradox, filled with ambiguities and dilemmas. A major concern for us is the relationship between integrity and hypocrisy. Is there not an absolute difference between these two traits? Or do we need an element of hypocrisy within our character development to support certain acts of integrity?

Most members of society seek to promote integrity and to eliminate hypocrisy. Yet can we eliminate hypocrisy completely? And if we happen to be successful in this endeavor, would this achievement jeopardize our very being? Is not hypocrisy a crucial part of our humanness and even our humaneness?

For example, we can strive to be as genuine and authentic as possible. We can even attempt complete honesty; and if great progress is realized, we could be transparent to society with nothing to hide or to keep secret. We would, however, soon be aware of the loss of our autonomy and privacy—even our possessions would not be safe.^{1(p282)} Therefore, without secrecy and especially deception, the cornerstone of hypocrisy, we would lose the very ground of our existence.

Another challenge to integrity is curiosity. This trait can be of value when it motivates a person to attain greater knowledge and education. Yet common curiosity can tempt a person to violate integrity in exchange for the personal knowledge of others—information an ethical person would not strive to attain. For instance, there are many different types of electronic surveillance systems available today that can be used to monitor board rooms or private homes. A bright high school science student can reflect a laser beam from the windows of a building and monitor conversations. Computer hackers can penetrate information data systems about our health and financial records. Travel routes can be followed with the aid of a small transmitter concealed within an automobile. Satellite telescopes have the capability to survey action over a large area. Video cameras and one-way mirrors are used to record various private activities. Miniature recorders, concealed easily, can be used to monitor conversations. In addition, parabolic reflectors with sensitive microphones can record voices beyond 100 yards. The major restraint toward using this equipment maliciously is honor, the keystone of integrity.

Also associated with the quest for integrity is the pursuit of truth, to do good, and to cause no harm. There are conditions in life, however, that cannot tolerate disclosure. The truth would be most devastating; therefore, we avoid revealing our candid opinion about many sensitive circumstances. Moreover, we preclude harm by not communicating frivolous information about someone to another person—although the information may be true. Silence and a respect for the feelings of others is a reflection of discretion and cannot be violated without a loss of integrity. We walk a fine line because we also appreciate trust and integrity as the foundation stones of our social existence; yet, we know we cannot always be truthful.

In Book II of *The Republic*, Socrates attempted to persuade Glaucon that to practice justice is always better than to be unjust. Yet Glaucon insisted that “those who practice justice do so involuntarily and because they have not the power to be unjust . . . and are only diverted into the path of justice by the force of law . . . such a power as is said to have been possessed by Gyges, the ancestor of Croesus the Lydian.”^{2(p311)} This was the power of the ring of Gyges. Glaucon argued that anyone presented with this ring would use it to become invisible. He explained to Socrates^{2(p312)}:

Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men.

Is Glaucon right? Is there no one in society with the iron nature to withstand the temptation of such power? Would curiosity alone entice everyone to use the ring? Still a power near that of the ring of Gyges can be used today with the aid of concealed sophisticated electronic monitoring and surveillance equipment.

Another power, one that was not considered by Glaucon, is the capacity to unveil the thought processes of another person. The possession of this capability would allow anyone tremendous advantage and influence. A gift of this magnitude would be difficult to refuse. Yet the possibility of attaining this promethean power is starting to appear on the horizon.

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Today the electroencephalogram is used to record the brain electrical activity as it is influenced by many conditions. Scientists are now perfecting the magnetoencephalogram,³ which is used to monitor and record the electromagnetic radiation of the brain at a distance. According to Roger Penrose, mathematician and physicist at the University of Oxford, "there is no doubt that electromagnetic phenomena have relevance to the workings of our brains."^{4(p150)} As a consequence, there may be a means of intercepting and monitoring the thought processes.⁵ This research is still in the experimental stage of development (B. Berger, "Mapping the Mindfields," *OMNI*, January 1992, pp 56-58). Yet with the exponential progress of computer science, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and quantum physics,⁴ we should not discount this power as a possibility in the future. How will we as physicians decide to use it? Are we indeed about to enter a new age, the Age of Truth?

There are many conditions in life that can test our integrity. Glaucon implied that there is an inverse correlation between integrity and temptation. Is Glaucon right? Can we be tempted beyond our sense of justice and integrity? Are we just only because we have not faced significant temptation? Socrates, however, did not agree with Glaucon. In the last book of *The Republic*, he said, "Let man do what is just, whether he have the ring of Gyges or not, and even if in addition to the ring of Gyges he put on the helmet of Hades."^{2(p436)}

Thus, as we strive to attain genuine character traits, we value justice, candor, honesty, and honor in our relationships with members of society. We disdain those who have no compunction about lying, deception, or duplicity. To this end, we may think of Molière's play *The Misanthrope* in which Alceste is particularly critical of Philinte's polite effusiveness toward another^{6(p869)}:

PHILINTE: But in polite society, custom decrees
That we show certain outward courtesies. . . .

ALCESTE: Ah, no! we should condemn with all our force
Such false and artificial intercourse.
Let men behave like men; let them display
Their inmost hearts in everything they say;
Let the heart speak, and let our sentiments
Not mask themselves in silly compliments.

PHILINTE: In certain cases it would be uncouth
And most absurd to speak the naked truth;
With all respect for your exalted notions,
It's often best to veil one's true emotions.
Wouldn't the social fabric come undone
If we were wholly frank with everyone?

Yet the ideal justice of Socrates or the rage for the genuine of Alceste is not found in our society as we know it today. We are, therefore, obliged to agree with Glaucon and Philinte and realize that the foundation stones of our integrity are bound together with the social fabric of deception and hypocrisy. Sissela Bok, writer and lecturer in ethics at Harvard Medical School, has said that there is an

inherent "fundamental duplicity of the human being."^{7(pxxv)} She added^{7(p256)}:

Nearly every kind of statement or action can be meant to deceive. Clearly intended lies—the most sharply etched forms of duplicity—have been in the foreground. . . . More marginal forms, such as evasion, euphemism, and exaggeration, have been close at hand, ready to prop up these lies or take their place. And all around have clustered the many kinds of deception intended to mislead without even marginally false statements: the changes of subject, the disguises, the gestures leading astray, all blending into the background of silence and inaction only sometimes intended to mislead.

Blaise Pascal certainly would have been in accord, as evidenced by his remark^{8(p192)}:

Human society is founded on mutual deceit; few friendships would endure if each spoke in sincerity and without passion. . . . [I] set it down as a fact that if all men knew what each said of the other, there would not be four friends in the world.

Our moral judgment is rarely without challenge. On the one hand, we strive for integrity. On the other, we must face hypocrisy because without deception we would sacrifice sensitivity and discretion. The truth can hurt.

Furthermore, if we were completely transparent, we could not maintain our autonomy, privacy, or possessions. The very ground of our being is contingent on some degree of deception. For this reason, we are obliged to sacrifice our candor by relying on secrets to protect our autonomy. Secrets cannot be protected without deceit, duplicity, or lying. Therefore, we cannot avoid hypocrisy—presenting to others the person we are not.

Still, we must maintain that delicate balance between integrity and hypocrisy to avert our existence. As a result, we are required to live in perpetual tension between these two conditions. The tension will increase as science and technology advance and the power for increased external secret surveillance and the power to intercept and monitor the internal thought processes becomes more available. As a consequence, the temptation to use these powers for our own advantage will bring about an ever-increasing challenge to our integrity and honor. The meaning of life, however, lies in its moral struggle.⁹ And, as it has always been true, one must advance from tension to struggle, then to insight and wisdom. For this reason, the quest for complete personal honesty, authenticity, and justice will always be a noble and difficult endeavor.

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